

POCAHONTAS AND THE ENGLISH BOYS: CAUGHT BETWEEN CULTURES IN EARLY VIRGINIA

Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Author)

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“Doughiness,” the quality of being “unbaked,” is the capacity to adjust to new contexts and learn new ways with ease (13). This is a term Karen Ordahl Kupperman writes in quotation marks and uses with a measure of irony, but it does visualize quite effectively one of the most salient conceptual nodes in *Pocahontas and the English Boys*: “doughiness” is a marker of adolescence as well as of the early Atlantic world, a trait one finds in youth and in colonists. In her book, Kuppermann reflects on youth and transatlantic citizenship as two conditions marked by fluidity and traces the histories of certain teenagers caught between cultures in 17th century England and Virginia. Although English youths did not go through a ritualized initiation like their American Indian peers, it was customary for them to leave their parents to serve another family; these teens were embarked on a ship, sent to the colonies, and left with Native communities until they had reached their twenties. Adolescence, Kupperman explains, was a “dark and dangerous” stage, a “nonage” (13), that English parents preferred to delegate. Forced to live in Native societies, these adolescents became well acquainted with Indigenous cultures and overseas geographies, forging futures as interpreters, and developing skills that were essential to transatlantic relationships.

The ambition of creating “amphibious” beings that would manage diplomatic relations with Native societies was not without collateral damage. Their double loyalties soon became a source of anxiety for them and for their employers: because they had access to the invisible workings of multiple cultures, they were under constant suspicion of mistranslating, erasing, and strategically manipulating diplomacy. In the case of Guillaume Rouffin, a boy who was first French, then Guale, and Spanish, Kupperman

wonders, “if someone had woken him up in the middle of the night and asked him who he was, how would he have replied? Would it depend on who was asking?” (18). Often asked to deliver false messages, to assist in the execution of treacherous schemes, or to conduct double-dealings which put their lives in danger, these intermediaries were no strangers to betrayal. Not only did they exist in a world that required reinvention and adaptation for survival, most of them had no choice but taking on the self-defeating task of mediating between cultures that plotted reciprocal destruction. “If they were to function well,” writes Kupperman, “their identities had to be ambiguous” (151).

Kupperman follows the American trajectories of three ‘doughy’ boys, Thomas Savage, Henry Spelman, and Robert Poole, who were sent to Virginia/Tsenacomoca in the early years of the 17th century and left with the families of local chiefs to learn their language and culture. Conversely, the author lingers on Pocahontas as the Native equivalent to Thomas, Henry, and Robert. Married to John Rolfe and celebrated in London as first convert and English gentlewoman, Kupperman invites the reader to imagine the “great inner conflict” (120) she must have faced at the thought of returning to Virginia to be the instrument of mass conversion. Although pneumonia and tuberculosis were probably the ultimate cause of her death, the author does not exclude that the immense stress she had suffered may have fatally weakened her body. Kupperman also tells the story of a Paspahegh boy named Paquiquineo, taken by the Spaniards in 1561 and brought back to Virginia ten years later to support a group of Jesuits in their work of conversion. It must have been excruciatingly painful for Paquiquineo, who returned to his tribe and ultimately led a war party that wiped out the Jesuit mission.

Kupperman’s *Pocahontas and the English Boys* is an immensely enjoyable book, blessed by approachable language and multiple anecdotes that make it flow like casual reading. One of the book’s strengths is its attention to words, manifested in the author’s dedication to calling things by their Indigenous names without erasing the colonial legacy of English, and to show how words shifted, evolved, and functioned on multiple levels simultaneously. Kupperman shows how a Native leader changing his name was bad news for the settlers—with consequences they often failed to foresee; that translating

the word “Lord” into Chesapeake Algonquian could have one charged with heresy (20), and that the renegades’ habit of running away from their home culture had one governor misspell them as “runnagates” (156). These semantic excursions show that words sometimes have a deceiving nature, and for these adolescents, who had no choice but doing the dangerous work of translation, managing ambiguity meant survival.

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